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THE ETHICAL ASPECT OF THE NEW THEOLOGY.

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“IF there is one thing more than another,” writes the late Master of Balliol, “which we may regard as the authentic stamp of the highest literary productions of the modern spirit, it is the breaking of the barriers between man and nature. Modern poetry has taught us to see in nature something closely akin to that which is highest within us.” What appears in literature as the breaking of the barriers between man and nature, appears in politics as the breaking of the barriers between man and man, in religion, of the barriers between man and God. Even the Protestant and evangelical movement, which in some of its utterances seems most remote from the spirit of pantheism, draws from it its chief doctrine of direct revelation to the human soul of a God who hears and communes with it through its aspirations after good. Nor shall we be far wrong in connecting the prevalent rejection of individualism and the acceptance of the reality of the general will, as the guiding principle of social reform, with the same trend of thought and feeling. If this means anything, it means the belief in the presence in every one born into society, of an informing spirit capable by grace and guidance of leading him into organic communion with a fuller because more universal life.

Viewed in this light the New Theology comes before us,

not as the heresy of an individual or group of individuals, but as the reassertion of a truth that no religion can be without, and that may be said to have been hid with all religion from the foundation of the world. This is admitted by its critics in their more sympathetic statements about it. "The New Theology," writes Dr. Gore in his eloquent book on *The New Theology and the Old Religion*, "is a convenient name for a current mode of thought which in its teaching about God lays the greatest stress upon what is called the Divine immanence. God, says the New Theology, is the self of the Universe and He is my deeper self and yours."¹ It stands, we may say, for the awakening of religious thought to the truth that the universe is one; the Infinite is here or nowhere; the world is begotten of God, not as something outside and independent of him which "he lets run round his finger," but as that in which (as it in him) he lives and moves and has his being. What is matter of surprise is not that the new thought should have made itself clearly and powerfully felt, in these days, in current theology, and have taken hold of clerical and lay mind alike as no other question except Darwinism,—itself a part of it,—but that it should have been so long in doing so. Perhaps it has not really been as long as we think and the present upheaval is merely the external audible expression of a force that has been working a silent revolution during the last half century. Be this as it may, the fact is before us and calls upon all who value religious truth for a conscious readjustment of their ideas comparable to nothing less than that which took place at the Protestant Reformation or at the introduction of Christianity itself. Henceforth the evidences of God's presence must be looked for, not in particular revelations at chosen times, but in the actual constitution and movement of the world around us. His action can no longer be taken as a distant, to many a fading, light by means of which certain events in the past are

¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 10 and 42.

to be explained, but rather as the master light of all our seeing in the world that is around us in the present. No single historical event or series of events, standing alone, however well attested, can any longer be accepted as the basis of religious faith. We must see God in history as a whole or not at all. If the single event or series of events is to stand as evidence, it must be seen in continuous perspective with the scheme of nature and history as a whole, and with the inward witness of the individual spirit. This is the essence of Modernism. Stated in its general form, I venture to suggest that it is the essence of common sense, and, as I think can be proved, of Christianity.²

But to see the truth in the new is one thing, to see how it is to be harmonized with what is true in the old, is another. That its representatives have failed to make this clear is the burden of the conservative critics. Nature and history, the New Theology maintains, are not something different from God. They are not merely to be conceived of as created or permitted by him, but to be the very garment that we know him by. But what, it is asked, on this view of God, becomes of human freedom and the deepest of all distinctions, the good and the evil? These seem to require the precisely opposite view of a God who is above and in a sense outside his creatures; and yet the New Theology provides no clear vindication of it. With a true instinct, Dr. Gore has made this question the center of his attack. He sees clearly enough that unless an answer is forthcoming to this question, the New Theology cannot hope to maintain itself against the weight of human experience and our sense of responsibility to ourselves and others. "You cannot dare educate a child in the belief that nothing he may do could have been otherwise. All possibility of moral progress is bound up with the

² Strictly speaking, 'Modernism' is a wider term than 'New Theology.' It stands for the general tendency of thought and feeling ("the claim to be free, to understand and to enjoy," as Green defined it) of which in a particular field the new theology is an interpretation. For the purpose of this article I use the terms synonymously.

belief in moral freedom. You can give no account on such a theory of the ineradicable consciousness of guilt and shame which belongs to a fairly good man when he has done really wrong, 'the self-contempt bitterer to drink than blood.' " I do not propose to enquire whether the accusation of failing to guard against a fatalistic interpretation of the new doctrines is justified in the case of any individual writer or of the whole school. In the space that remains I wish to try to indicate what seems to me to be the primary and essential condition of a satisfying answer to the problems that are raised, the one stable rallying ground of those who would at once remain faithful to the truth that is in the old and to the new light that, in the words of the great New England hymn, the Lord has broken forth out of his Word.

I do not think I need waste time in proving that the way is closed and never likely to be opened again to any mere reassertion of the old doctrines of transcendence. The same deep underlying convictions that lead men to reject a doctrine of pure immanence lead them also to reject a merely supereminent God. It is instinctively felt that both the motive and the direction of progressive moral effort depend on belief in the actual presence of the divine in the world about us and in the hearts of men. Extremes meet, and to believe in a God whose nature is nowhere expressed as an organic part of the world of our ordinary experience, is to empty it of any principle of moral judgment or ground of moral choice as effectually as to believe in a complete and undifferentiating immanence. An authoritative papacy and moral direction by Encyclical is the natural and necessary complement of such a faith. One thing at least that we owe to the recent outburst of Modernism is that it has made this clear, and in doing so has *inter alia* put an end for the present to the Anglo-Catholic movement, as a movement toward union with Rome.

It may not be so readily agreed, but it seems to me no

less certain, that the time has gone past, as far as theology is concerned, when men's minds could be satisfied with any attempt at compromise as between two contradictory principles. The intellectual demands of an age like our own are a far more formidable factor in the crisis than many are prepared to recognize. Men will not be frightened into obviously insecure logical positions by theological or even by ethical bogies. It is for this reason that I find Dr. Gore's argument as a whole inconclusive. With the best will I have failed to find in it a point of view which offers a real synthesis. Equally unsatisfying is the attempt at compromise in the Confession of Faith recently published by some leading Congregationalists. God, it explains, is "transcendent as Maker and Ruler of all things and yet through His eternal Spirit immanent in the world and particularly in man and his history."³ As a popular statement of what is implied in the religious consciousness and what theology seeks to explain, I have nothing against it. As a statement of the philosophical ground on which it is possible to maintain the union, what I again miss is any real attempt to show how the two truths are related to each other.

If the statement means anything for philosophy, it is an attempt to meet the difficulty by distinguishing between God as the source of material nature and God as the inspirer of human life. In the one sphere he is said to be transcendent,—essentially different from the world he has created and which he rules,—in the other he is immanent, the truth or reality of wills that appear to be independent of him. But apart from the arbitrariness of such a distinction, what difficulty, we may ask, does it remove from our path? It is true that it avoids the error of identifying the ultimate principle of all things with matter and motion, but it does this at the expense of the unity of the world, and, if pressed to its consequences, would lead us back to the Manichæan doctrine of a material principle in

³ *The Times*, February 27, 1908.

its essence impervious to spirit. Similarly from the side of spirit, it avoids the error of conceiving of the divine as essentially distinct from the human and only to be united with it by some miraculous principle acting from without, but it leaves the relation between them wholly unexplained and, so far as the above statement is concerned, opens the way for just such a pantheistic interpretation as it seeks to avoid. What the coming generation will require of its theology, whether it be New or Old, is that it shall show how these two principles are not merely both required to satisfy our practical and religious needs, but spring from a common root of essential truth, of which they are necessary and mutually complementary aspects. Apart from such a demonstrated unity, there can be no stable footing for either of the opposing tendencies. They will drift according to accidental bias either into a doctrine of pure naturalism or into the obscurities and superstitions,—perhaps, as we are warned by ominous words in Dr. Gore's book as to the possibility of permanent alienation from the divine and of everlasting perdition,⁴—into what it is not too much to call the “inhumanities of the old religion.”

Where is such a point of view to be found? So far from being anything particularly metaphysical or recon-dite, it is I believe contained in what is the most characteristic and generally accepted doctrine of our time. If we were to ask what is the most significant of the ideas that for the last century have been pressing for recognition in every field of thought and endeavor, we should have little hesitation in pointing to the idea of evolution. We are accustomed to think of it in terms of biology, but the idea has a far wider application as the general description of all processes, whether of life or mind, in which the issue is determined by the interplay of the environment and real latent potentialities in the thing or creature itself. Any detailed *prolegomena* to the applica-

⁴ See particularly Sect. IV, *The Idea of Sin*.

tion of this idea to theology is here out of the question. The point clearly to grasp is the one which recent philosophy has been occupied in trying to bring home to us, namely: the place of end or purpose in everything that has life,—perhaps also in things devoid of life in the recognized sense of the word. To live is to seek to embody in actual reality what previously was a mere potentiality or need. And as in all living things this need is continuous while the actual form is transient, we are forced to conceive of the object of the *nisus* or endeavor as real in even a deeper sense (albeit it has itself no existence in time) than its actual temporal embodiment. By the same line of thought we are forced to conceive of the two factors as in essential relation with each other. The creature could not be what it is apart from the *nisus* that makes it seek to be what it is not yet. On the other hand the creature seeks to be what it is not yet, just because it has already realized it so far as to be what it is.

This comes out more clearly when we turn from nature in general, as recent psychology has taught us to do, to the analysis of the processes of consciousness in terms of end. It is in mind that the idea of evolution has its clearest, perhaps its only truly comprehensible, application. From whatever side we look at human life, from that of knowledge, conduct, or production, it comes to us as a process of *search*,—a purposeful direction by ideas of that which is not yet but which we desire shall be. To this, logical and ethical analysis adds that no satisfactory account can be given of these ideas themselves except when they are seen in relation to the ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty, of which they in turn are partial (sometimes lamentably distorted) embodiments. To these ideals, what has already been said of ends in general still more manifestly applies. As ideals they are beyond us, fading, as we reflect upon them in their perfection, into an infinite distance from us. Yet it is no less true that they are in us, not only in the sense that they are in our minds, but that they have already made our minds, and

with this our lives, what they actually are. What truth man has discovered and actually holds, what beauty he has achieved and actually enjoys, what good he has done and actually lives by, have their being from their relations to that which they are not completely, yet which they partially portray. In a word, the ideal is *in* the world just because it is *above* it; it is recognized as above it just because it is already manifested in it. While the ideals that work in the mind of man and force themselves through his untiring activity into the forms of time, are the *causa essendi* of what actually exists, the real, as it offers itself to his senses and memory, is the *causa cognoscendi* of the ideal.

Turning from these general considerations as to the nature of reality to the theological problem with which we started, there is no point on which modern religious writers are more agreed than that the divine is most adequately conceived of in terms of the unity of men's highest ideals. Yet the present conflict of opinion is sufficient indication how inadequately they have realized what such an admission carries along with it. This, I think it will be now obvious, is precisely the point of view of which we are in search, seeing that the unity of these ideals in a completely developed spiritual life can now be seen to be at once something transcending anything which man either has or can attain, and something which combines the indwelling principle of all that he already is.

The claim that is here put forward that this idea should be made the starting point of all future theology, could only be rendered convincing by its detailed application to the great facts of the spiritual life and the great doctrines which are the attempt to give intellectual expression to them and, as Father Tyrrell has shown, run like a binding thread through the ages. Nothing of the kind is of course here possible. I confine myself to a single illustration from the religious consciousness itself and the sense of sin, which is an inseparable part of it.

It is, I believe, just such a union of the two elements

of the immanent and the transcendent in human life that makes religion possible and finds expression in all its highest utterances. On the one side, religion is the acknowledgment of the transcendence of the divine: God is high, we cannot attain unto him. Yet this consciousness is only rendered possible by the sense that we have *already* in some measure attained, and that, in what we are, we are already akin to, and have in a sense anticipated, what we may become. It is for this reason that the sense of infinite distance is ever on the point of turning into the conviction that the Word is nigh us, even in our mouth and in our heart. These are not two different views of the relation of the soul to God, to be held now at one time and now at another, but they are essential parts of the unity of religious consciousness and, as all religious experience witnesses, stand in such intimate union with each other that the more a man realizes the one, the closer he is to the other; the more he realizes his own worthlessness before God, the nearer he is to the promises of his grace.

The true doctrine of sin is only a further application of the same principle. It is often brought against the supporters of the immanence of the divine that they make God responsible for sin or (which comes to the same thing) make the sense of sin an illusion. I believe there is a sense in which we have to admit this objection. We have to admit that were it not for the consciousness of God, for the presence of God (if you like) in our lives, there could be no sin. As St. Paul puts it, "I had not known sin except for the law," and the law is of God. It is the divine in us that makes possible the rejection of the divine. We are led astray, and the light that leads astray is light from heaven. But this admission is far from obliterating the distinction between good and evil or making God responsible for our rebellion. On the contrary, it may, I think, be shown to be the only view that secures us from such a conclusion and gives an intelligible meaning to the common doctrine (otherwise a mere subterfuge), that God *permits* though he does not tempt us to

sin. For the coming theology at any rate it will be difficult to find any third alternative between Manichæism and the doctrine that the possibility of moral good is essentially bound up with the possibility of evil, and that the revelation of the divine in human life (and so far as we know in the universe at large) is in proportion to the extent of the redeeming power which one has over the other.

It is easy to anticipate the difficulty that some will feel in such a doctrine. To those who are accustomed to think of God under the form of human personality or of a mind standing to our minds as that of another individual, without ever reflecting what it is in each of us that underlies and makes our own personality, it is bound to appear as the attempt to substitute a vague aspiration (in main part the creation of our own idealizing imagination) for a living, substantial, and independent reality,—a faith, it may be said, “as vague as all unsweet.” Such an interpretation seems to rest on a double fallacy. If what has been already said of the nature of our ideals as the living forces which have been the source of, and which live on in all that we most value in art, science, morality, and religion, it is the reverse of the truth to think of them as mere empty longings or as the illusions by which we cheat our aching hearts. That we can so misinterpret them can only come from our deadness to the stirrings within us of

The mighty hopes that make us men,

and our habitual insensibility to the value of their great creations in the life about us.

To the same mental inertia is due the second mistake of never permitting our minds to carry us beyond the ordinary anthropomorphic conception of the Divine. There is (as Hegel said) a sense in which we cannot be too anthropomorphic. We cannot too strongly insist that we should think of God in terms of the highest in ourselves. But this turns into a snare when we seek to surround the Eternal with the limits of human personality. We may, I think, be agreed that we are called on by our religion to

conceive of God as a Spirit, not in the sense of an emaciated or bodiless soul, but of the fullest form of spiritual life of which we ourselves are capable. And this means that useful as personality may be as a way of envisaging the source of such a life, it can only be an obstruction to the spiritual vision when taken as a limit of our conceptions.

But these are only after all details for the theologians of the future to work into clearness. What I am here concerned for is the principle and starting point. And this I hope I have made sufficiently plain.

I wish to conclude by noticing that the principle of the solution is not any more than the problem itself a new thing in theology. Both the problem and the solution are as old as Plato. Plato's doctrine of ideas stands, in the history of theology, for the intellectual recognition of the transcendence of the divine in life. But no sooner had Plato recognized the transcendence of the idea, than he perceived that no real significance could attach to it unless it were also seen to be immanent in things. It was the problem of the reconciliation of the two principles that occupied him in the crisis of his thought as represented by the great dialogues of the "Republic," the "Philebus," and the "Timæus." The principle of his solution is well known. Whichever of the later dialogues we take up, the idea we find prominent in it is that of an end or purpose, an inner effort or striving after Good as the source of what is best in nature and human life.

Even more definitely, Aristotle brings the threads of his great treatise on theology (otherwise confusing enough) together in the question of the relation of God as the good and the best to the universe. "Is good," he asks, "included as something separate and as an adjunct in itself transcendent? Or is it immanent, pervading the whole arrangement of the constituent parts? Or does it exist in both ways at once, as in the case of a disciplined army; for in the army good belongs both to the array and to the

general, and indeed more to the latter, seeing that the array is directed by the general and not the general by the array.”⁵ His own solution is that it is both at once, and for no other reason than that it is the end to which the whole creation moves. “It causes motion after the manner of a beloved object, and that which it causes to move causes motion in other things.”⁶

From Aristotle we know it passed to Dante. “All things, whatsoever they be, have order among them, and this is the form that makes the universe like unto God. Within the order I speak of, all things incline by diverse lots, some nearer, some further from their goal. Wherefore they move to diverse harbors over the great sea of being, each with the instinct that is given it to bear it on.”⁷ The greatness of the passage consists, not in the originality of the thought,—which as we have seen was Plato’s and Aristotle’s,—but in the genius which led Dante to see in it the quintessence of Christianity.

If it be asked why, in the centuries that have intervened, we have lost hold of the clue that the genius of ancient and mediæval theology placed in our hands, the answer probably is to be sought in the subjection of reason in matters of religion to the authority first of a Church and then of a Book. This subjection doubtless has had its place in man’s spiritual economy,—a school-master perhaps to bring us to freedom. None the less it has had the effect of breaking the true continuity of theological thought and of diverting attention to conceptions of the Divine Nature which were bound sooner or later to come into conflict with the course of divine revelation itself. What is chiefly wanted at the present time and as the basis of the theology of the future, is to return to this great tradition, taking up the clue where it was dropped and applying it to the facts of the spiritual world as our experience deepened by the intervening ages has enabled us to conceive of them.

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⁵ *Metaphysic*, XII, 1075 a, 11. ⁶ *Ibid.*, 1072 b, 3. ⁷ *Paradiso*, I, 103.